

# **The Repression at Belgrade University**

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February 7, 1974

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(The following statement was prepared by experts on the situation in Yugoslavia whom we believe to be reliable. We think it will interest your readers. —Noam Chomsky, MIT; Robert S.Cohen, Boston University)

## A. Background

1949–1950. A new generation of young philosophers and social theorists, many of whom took active part in the liberation war (1941–1945), graduated and assumed teaching positions at the universities of Belgrade and Zagreb. They appeared on the scene during Yugoslavia's resistance to Stalin's attempts to dominate the country. They were mostly Marxists, but from the beginning they opposed Stalinist dogmatism and emphasized freedom of research, humanism, openness to all important achievements of present-day science and culture.

1950–1960. A decade of discussions on basic theoretical issues, organized by the Yugoslav philosophical association. The debates were quite free; several groups opposed one another on different grounds. By the end of this period they all realigned along two basic lines, the orthodox one which stayed within the traditional framework of dialectical materialism and which considered theory to be essentially a reflection of the objective social situation and material surroundings, and the humanist one which emphasized the anticipatory and critical character of theory, its unity with praxis, and its great role in the process of humanization of a given society.

1960. At a conference in Bled, the humanist, praxis-oriented trend prevailed and subsequently became dominant in Yugoslav universities, journals, institutes.

1962. Yugoslav society experienced its first postwar stagnation as a result of an unsuccessful attempt to make its currency convertible. At the biannual meeting of the Yugoslav philosophical association in Skopje, November, 1962, the view was expressed for the first time that it is urgent to go beyond abstract theoretical discussion about the nature of man and knowledge, about alienation and freedom, and the relation between philosophy and science—and toward a more concrete, critical study of Yugoslav society, guided by general humanist insights.

1963. A series of conferences and discussions with the attempt to clarify some general social issues: the meaning of technology, of freedom and democracy, of social progress, of the role of culture in building a socialist society. In August, the Korcula Summer School was founded by Zagreb and Belgrade philosophers and sociologists, with the purpose of organizing free international summer discussions on actual social issues.

1964. The journal *Praxis* was founded by the same group. A new series of discussions, this time about sensitive issues of Yugoslav society: the meaning and perspective of socialism, bureaucratic and authoritarian tendencies in the party and the state apparatus, advantages and weaknesses of the existing forms of self-management and its possibilities for further development, the right of a minority to continue to defend its views rather than conforming to the views of the majority.

Most of these critical views and ideas seemed compatible with the liberal Program of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (accepted at the Seventh Congress, 1958), but in reality were met with intolerance by alarmed party leaders. The transition from criticism of Stalinism toward a concrete critical analysis of Yugoslav society led to an almost complete break of communication between party officials and leading Marxist social and political philosophers.

1965–1967. While preserving a political system far more elitist and authoritarian than a developed system of participatory democracy could tolerate, the political leadership introduced an

economic reform that was to fail: returning to a nineteenth-century model of a laissez-faire economy, leaving the Yugoslav economy at the mercy of big foreign firms in the “free competition” at the international market, causing mass unemployment and huge foreign debts, allowing speculation in real estate and a rapid increase of social differences, encouraging the growth of autarchic tendencies in the existing six republics of the Yugoslav federation—which later constituted a material basis for strong nationalist movements.

Expression of critical views about these developments (themselves later condemned as manifestations of “liberalism” and “nationalism” by the party itself) was met by growing hostility by the party press. Critical philosophers and sociologists were branded “abstract humanists,” “utopians,” “revisionists,” “anarcho-liberals,” “neoleftists,” “extreme leftists,” finally, “political opposition that aspires to political power.”

1968. In June, students of the University of Belgrade occupied all university buildings for seven days. They demanded abolition of bureaucratic privileges, further democratization, solution of the problem of mass unemployment, reduction of social differences, university reform.

In one of his speeches during the crisis, Tito praised the students, endorsed all their demands, and declared he would resign if he failed to realize them.

Later, when this grave political crisis was over, the political leadership and Tito himself came to the conclusion that philosophers were responsible for it because through their lectures they had “corrupted their students,” “poisoned them with wrong ideas,” and thus produced the student movement. The party organization at the Department of Philosophy and Sociology in Belgrade was dissolved. For the first time, Tito expressed the demand that further corruption “of students through their professors must be prevented,” and that guilty professors must be ousted from the university.

1969–1972. Growing pressure was exerted by the Central Party leadership on lower-level political institutions to find a way to eliminate the professors. But this was a difficult task. Yugoslavia had developed a democratic organization of education and culture. All decision-making power in matters of electing, re-electing and promoting university professors was in the hands of the faculty councils—the autonomous, self-managing bodies composed of professors, assistants, and students themselves. The university law emphasized scholarly qualification as the sole criterion of election. It did not give political authorities any right to interfere.

In the previous period, the officially declared policy of the League of Communists (LC) was that all theoretical controversies should be cleared up through discussion and free exchange of opinion. Therefore the rather democratically-minded leadership of the LC in Serbia resisted the use of repressive measures against some of the leading philosophers and sociologists of the country. They were, however, refused access to mass media and mass gatherings, and the possibilities for circulating their ideas became much more limited. Still, they were able to teach, to travel abroad, to have 300–400 participants from various countries at the Summer School of Korcula, to publish the journals *Praxis* and *Filosofija*, and occasionally to publish a book or two.

The time was used to develop a cluster of fairly sophisticated and concrete theories about socialism and social revolution, integral self-management, the phenomenon of bureaucratism, humanization of technology, democratic direction of economy and culture, the problem of nationalism, etc.

Fall, 1972. Tito ousted the leader of the League of Communists of Serbia, Marko Nikezic, and a number of his supporters. They were blamed for “liberal” practices and for opposing the new party line. The main feature of this new line was the return to a strong, disciplined, centralized,

“monolithic” party that has the right and power directly to control and manage the realization of its policies. This called for complete ideological unity, consequently for a return to a crude form of ideological indoctrination, and for the abandonment of all former sophisticated ideas of creating new socialist consciousness through dialogues or struggles of opinion and patient persuasion.

The Faculty of Philosophy was now exposed to intense pressure. There were rumors of enemies, foreign spies on the teaching faculty; there were threats of stopping further financing, of closing the faculty. The faculty building was equipped with hidden microphones, some of which were found. The University Committee of the League of Communists drew up a list of eight professors to be fired. Passports were confiscated from five of them. Portions of some of their recently published books were banned. Some collaborators of the journal *Praxis* were arrested and sentenced to jail.

At that moment dozens of internationally known philosophers and social scientists from Scandinavia, USA, Germany, France, and other countries wrote letters to Tito and the rectors of the universities of Belgrade and Zagreb, expressing their concern about those repressive measures and the hope that they would be discontinued in the interest of the further free development of Yugoslav democratic socialism. Many philosophical associations, departments of philosophy, academies, international institutions devoted to human rights and civil liberties passed resolutions of concern and sent them to Yugoslavia.

This discreet expression of solidarity of the international intellectual community made a considerable impact on Yugoslav authorities who were proud of their past international reputation and who, in the existing economic and foreign-political situation of the country, could not afford to disregard world public opinion. They decided to take their time and to give repression a more democratic appearance.

## B. Recent Developments

Slowly crushing the resistance of the Faculty of Philosophy without provoking too much international publicity required a series of steps. Some of these were easy, some were met with unexpected difficulties or even failed completely.

It was relatively easy to introduce certain important changes into existing university law. The law as now amended requires a university professor not only to have scholarly and moral qualifications but also to be politically acceptable. Political organizations now have the right to initiate a procedure in order to establish whether any individual university teacher meets political criteria.

A third change was a general and vague limitation of the principle of self-management. While heretofore the vast majority of the members of the faculty councils had to be elected by the faculty and students themselves, now the law prescribed that the composition of the council had to be determined through a “self-managing agreement” between the faculty and its founder—the Republican Executive Council (i.e., the government of the given Federal Republic).

The next step was to translate those legal changes into more specific and practical demands. The plan was *first* to specify political criteria for being a university professor in such a way that they could be applied to ousting the eight Belgrade professors, who previously could not be removed; *second* to push the party organization and the students’ organization into condemning

their colleagues and teachers; *third* to compel the University of Belgrade to accept a sufficient number of outside voting members into the councils so as to enable political authorities to gain full control over the decision-making process in the Faculty of Philosophy.

These measures met with considerable resistance. When a text of Criteria for the Election of University Professors was first proposed to the University Assembly in June, 1973, most speakers objected strongly to it. They found certain criteria too rigid, for example the requirement that a university professor must accept Marxism and actively support the politics of the League of Communists in his lectures and in all his scholarly and public activity. But later the Rector of the University, most deans, and eventually the University Assembly succumbed to the pressure, and in November accepted the text of the Criteria.

Only the Faculty of Philosophy rejected it, and gave the following grounds, among others: it was unconstitutional because the existing constitution guarantees freedom of scientific work and cultural creation and forbids any kind of pressure on individuals to declare what kind of beliefs they have; it was unacceptable because the vast majority of Belgrade University professors are not Marxists and are apolitical; it was discriminatory because it allows, by its vagueness, any conceivable kind of interpretation; and it was discriminatory also because these Criteria were being imposed on the University of Belgrade only, and not on any other Yugoslav university.

In May, 1973, the Belgrade University committee of the League of Communists sent an open letter to the party organization of the Faculty of Philosophy, demanding the ouster of eight professors: Mihailo Marković, Ljubomir Tadić, Svetozar Stojanović, Zaga Pešić, Miladin Zivotić, Dragoljub Mićunović, Nebojša Popov, Triva Indijić. After a series of meetings, attended by a large number of higher-ranking party officials who exerted great pressure on students and professors to conform to the demand, the party organization of the Faculty of Philosophy nevertheless rejected the ouster demand. A few of the most active opponents were expelled from the party, but when the party organization of the faculty met again in November, it decided, again unanimously, that the eight professors should stay at the faculty. There was a complete conviction that a university professor cannot be fired for expressing critical views in his writings, especially taking into account that the party itself now was repeating many of the criticisms that were expressed by those same scholars several years ago.

In November, 1973, a university committee of the student organization made an attempt to force students of the Faculty of Philosophy into action against their professors, threatening them with possible violence if the faculty continued to resist. But the philosophy students refused to undertake anything of the sort and, on the contrary, to everyone's surprise, organized a street demonstration (although strictly forbidden in recent years, and in the past forcefully dispersed by the police). This time, students protested against repression in Greece and against the massacre in the University of Athens. There was no violence.

The crucial issue during the last six months has been the composition of the faculty councils. Self-management in the university meant that even in the institutions of special social importance, such as educational ones, only a small number of outside members were nominated by political authorities. Now the executive council (the government) of the Serbian Republic demanded that half the members of the faculty councils must be nominated from outside the university. Taking into account that students and administration must also be represented in the councils, this would give only one sixth of the votes to both professors and assistants and would clearly replace self-management by compulsory management.

By October, after initial resistance, the Rector of the university and all faculties except the Faculty of Philosophy succumbed to the pressure. They were told that this new structure had been prescribed by the university law and therefore could not be a matter of debate. As a matter of fact the law only prescribed that the composition of the faculty councils had to be determined through a “self-managing agreement” between the faculty and its founder (the Republic’s executive council). The Faculty of Philosophy refused to sign the agreement because it was unconstitutional and incompatible with the principle of self-management, and because the very concept of agreement involves negotiation. The faculty asked the Constitutional Court to decide about the legitimacy of the imposed “agreement.” At the same time, the faculty also drew up a counterproposal. But there was no negotiation and communication was broken.

An extremely abusive campaign was launched against the Faculty of Philosophy through the party newspaper *Komunist*, as well as through the press, radio, and TV. The faculty was accused of opposing the introduction of “self-management” at the university, of opposing the policy of the League of Communists, of keeping a monopoly on education, and of opposing any influence from “society,” of asking help from foreign scholars, etc. At the same time the faculty was threatened with expulsion from the University of Belgrade, with refusal to finance its further activity or to employ its graduated students, and with eventual closing down.

Under growing pressure of this kind, the Faculty Council decided on December 14, 1973, to authorize its Dean to sign the “self-managing agreement.”

### **C. The Present Situation**

The Faculty Council will now have half of its members nominated by political authorities. They will certainly be carefully selected from among leading political officials and disciplined members of the League of Communists. They will surely pose the question of removing the eight professors from the Department of Philosophy and Sociology as they do not meet the recently accepted political criteria. The political leadership will obviously press to clear the situation up before the Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in the spring.

It may still not be an easy task. According to law, assistants are re-elected every three years, associate professors and assistant professors every five years—which means that legally one would have to wait for the expiration of that period for each candidate. Full professors do not undergo the process of re-election at all (i.e., they have tenure), which means that two among the eight (Marković and Tadić) cannot at this time legally be removed at all.

Another important circumstance is also that the party organization of the Faculty of Philosophy—whose opinion counts when it comes to political evaluation—has never agreed to condemn, or endorse the elimination of, any one from the group.

A relevant fact is that the threatened scholars enjoy a considerable reputation in the university and among other intellectuals. The action against them is not popular and, despite great efforts, the apparatus of the League of Communists was not able to find any well-known Yugoslav philosopher, sociologist, or political scientist to attack them.

The crucial questions are now (1) whether the outside members of the council will be disciplined enough by the government to perform according to their orders when they face their victims in the council; and (2) whether some of the inner members of the council, professors from

various other departments of the Faculty of Philosophy, will yield to pressure and eventually vote for the firing of their colleagues.

Neither development is inevitable, but both are possible. Without strong political pressure many outside members would—as in the past—not even attend the meetings, or would be passive or vote with the rest. Thus everything will now depend on how brutal the effort will be and how far the political authorities will go in pressing the members of the council. Meanwhile, during the past six months several of the eight philosophers under attack have again been deprived of their passports.

## **D. Call for Action**

The degree of pressure will depend on whether the whole thing will pass in silence as a little episode in one of the world's many universities, or whether it will be understood for what it is: one of the last battles for survival of free, critical, progressive thought in the present-day socialist world, in a country which is still open to democratic development and where until recently it seemed to have every chance to flourish.

That is where the reaction of the international intellectual community may again play a decisive role. The whole political and economic position of Yugoslavia makes it sensitive to world public opinion. By showing an interest in what is going on now in Yugoslav cultural life, by spreading the information, by raising the issue in international organizations, by expressing concern and protest in the press or in letters to Tito (which, after the recent escalation, should have more resolute and sharp form than previous ones), scholars and intellectuals everywhere could help to relax the present grip of the Yugoslav leadership and induce it to live up somewhat better to its own ideology of self-management and socialist democracy.

All the repressive measures so far have not sufficed fully to isolate and suffocate Yugoslav philosophy. But this might well happen in the weeks to come if the scholarly world will tolerate the further escalation of brutality and fear in a country that until not long ago has been an island of hope for many.



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The Repression at Belgrade University  
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From *The New York Review of Books*, February 7, 1974

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